

Getting Back to Basics: Eat More Vegetables

By Dr. Christopher Napol

Anyone who regularly reads this column knows that I am a strong advocate of nutritional supplements. This is based on the preponderance of scientific evidence of two facts. One is that our food supplies don't contain high enough levels of the trace minerals we need for optimum health. We know that fertile, untilled soil contains about 70 trace minerals. Once that soil has been commercially farmed for five years, those levels approach zero. This is because modern farming utilizes techniques that produce maximum yield in pounds per acre, not nutrients per pound. Very little is put back after each harvest.

The second reason for championing supplements is that the vast majority of Americans don't eat properly. Even if our fruits and vegetables were brimming over with every vital nutrient, most Americans wouldn't be much healthier. Most meals in the American home or in restaurants consist of a large portion of meat, chicken or fish, a large portion of starchy carbohydrates like bread, potatoes, pasta or rice, and very small portion of vegetables (just to add a splash of color to the plate).

Many people site their nightly iceberg lettuce salad as their main vegetable. This doesn't cut it because most leafy green salads are actually small portions (One pound of raw greens would cook down to ½ cup); and iceberg lettuce supplies about the same number of nutrients as the ice it's named after.

While study after study is beginning to confirm the fact that people who take vitamin and mineral supplements are healthier, too many Americans are beginning to look at that as a substitute for a good diet, it is not. Fruits and vegetables supply antioxidants, nutrients, fiber and vital phytochemicals you can't get from a pill.

There are endless studies that prove that the more vegetables you eat the lower your risk of cancer, heart disease, autoimmune diseases, constipation, obesity, and diabetes. If you were to assemble a truly healthy lunch or dinner plate it would consist of a small (3-4 ounce) portion of meat, fish or chicken, a small portion of starch, and the rest of the plate would be vegetables.

Variety is also a key here. Too often we fall into a rut of eating only two or three different types of vegetables. Make a conscious effort to try different fruits and vegetables. Try to include a wide range of colors on your plate as well. Many of the pigments in fruits and veggies supply potent anti-cancer compounds and strong anti-oxidants. It's the combination of different phytochemicals that give each vegetable its unique color and flavor.

Where do you start? Mix and match deep green leafy veggies like spinach, Swiss chard, collards, beet greens, kale and dandelion. These tend to be rich in beta-carotene, folate, calcium and fiber. While raw is always better, most of these nutrients actually do survive the cooking process.

Be sure to include plenty of yellow and red veggies like yellow squash, butternut squash, yellow and red peppers, carrots, and sweet potatoes. These also supply other carotenes, vitamin C, folate and fiber.

Experiment with legumes like peas, red and white kidney beans, red, yellow, brown, or green lentils, chick peas, pink beans, and black beans. These supply fiber, potassium, B vitamins, protein and iron (to name just a few). There are some great bean soup mixes, available at supermarkets and health food stores that combine as many as 18 different colored and textured beans in one dish. All you need to do is add water and simmer for a while.

Don't forget to include as many cruciferous vegetables as you can. These "super-veggies" are in the cabbage family and include green and red cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and brussel sprouts. Among many other nutrients, these supply two very potent anti-cancer compounds called sulforaphane and indole-3-carbinol.

When selecting produce I usually recommend frozen for two reasons. Because many frozen vegetables are processed and packed right at the farm, studies show they may actually have higher nutrient value than "fresh". Most of the stuff in the fresh produce section left the farm days or weeks before and many of the nutrients are just a memory. The second reason is convenience. Plain frozen vegetables are usually pre-chopped, easily stored and ready to cook. Convenience means you're more likely to eat more of them.

Finally, experiment with different ways of spicing and preparing your vegetables. Too many people simply boil their veggies, I can't think of anything more boring. Would you want to eat your main course if it consisted of a nice boiled steak or boiled filet of sole? If you don't know what to do with your veggies buy a vegetarian cookbook. You'll find that a well-prepared vegetable can actually be the high point of a meal, and not just some filler to the left of the entrée; give it a try. Not only will dinner taste a lot better, but you'll add healthy years to your life in the process.

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